

## SERMON – A PLACE OF GRACE – Be Still and know

Today I thought I'd speak from a different place inside our church building and you will see why in a moment. But I think I'll start with a bit of a confession.

This last month has been a very testing one. All things covid, vaccines and mandates, thinking through and talking through in so many conversations around all the complex emotive challenges that are with us and to come, has felt just a bit too, ALL CONSUMING. I confess that at the end of last week, I was feeling a tad weary and burdened, to quote Jesus. But I also have to say, I've been incredibly supported by so many people in prayer for which I'm very grateful. I have also continued to be very diligent and intentional about two of my core Spiritual disciplines.

Firstly, I've tried to make laughter the best medicine. I've tried to end each day watching something that makes me laugh. Clips from Fawlty Towers, classic comedy films and I've even rediscovered one of my old childhood favourites on You Tube, Laurel and Hardy. I've realised that there's nothing like a bit of good slapstick comedy to lighten the load, when your brain has turned to mush under all the heavyweight ethical issues before us all.

The second thing I've done, is to keep listening to, and keep following the deep wisdom of Holy Scripture. This has been very important to me and it's this that has actually led me to come here in the church. I wanted to make to time to **“Be still and know the great I AM-ness of God's presence.** I wanted to contemplate those beautifully encouraging words of Jesus Christ. 28 **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest for your souls.** And I love the message translation gives us a truly memorable phrase. 28-30 **“Are you tired? Worn out? Come to me and learn the unforced rhythms of grace. Come to me and recover your life by learning to live freely and more lightly.”**

Now I recognise that I'm very privileged to be able to do this and come here into the church, because I have the keys and it's not very far to travel. But that said, I haven't really been over since Lockdown began because I think I found it all a bit painful to be honest. But what's been really interesting for me, is to see just how coming back into this sacred space has evoked all sorts of feelings and observations. It's been a tangible reminder of what it means to be a worshipping community. It's been rest for my soul. A time of RECONNECTION. So I thought, why don't I share this with you. You may not be able to come to the church building but I can bring the building to you. Today I want to celebrate together, through music, image and story, this sacred space that we are so blessed and privileged to call our place of worship.

The first thing I want to celebrate, is what I guess struck me the most as I sat here and reflected. Yes, it's a building, but as you look around at all the beautiful icons and artwork, it reminded me that the Church of Christ is about the people of Christ. You and me, the body of Christ. Its why we have on our website with our Core values....He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. The people the people the people.

But I've also been reminded, about the importance and the power, of Sacred spaces and Sacred places. We've all visited places where as soon as we enter, we feel the tangible presence of God and the holy history that permeates it. Places where people's prayers and singing and worship have infused the buildings with the Spirit's presence. Holy echoes of lives given, in service to God and each other. The deep truth of St Peters words in today's passage. **10 Each of you use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.** And for me, this is what this church of St George's is. We've been here 11 years now from the UK but I'm aware of its history, the cloud of witnesses who have given of their lives in service to God and to each other. Expressions of grace in all its various forms.

But as I've sat in this sacred space, there is one feature in particular, that kept catching my gaze and drawing me in. What is it? It's this.

The banner at the altar. **The Tree of life for the healing of the nations.** A scripture verse from Revelation 22



If you aren't familiar with the story of this, let me give you a brief re-cap. When Gareth and I became Co-vicars, we wanted to symbolically represent our 4 core values. That we are **A place of Grace** – that our God-given **Diversity is a Gift**- That we celebrate **Creativity** and aspire to be people of **Justice** – And we also want to follow the Spirit's leading and **Dare Greatly**. So the idea was born to create this banner, and one of our octogenarians Jackie Pitman was the real inspiration behind it. She actually sowed every leaf that all of you designed, onto the banner.

**And why is this banner so symbolically and spiritually significant?** I think it's because every leaf on this 'tree of life', is a creative expression of our community. An act of worship. And I actually can't imagine St George's now without this. So, let's pause and have some time for a meditation on this banner and all that it represents. I've put together some photos with close ups of the beautiful leaves. All set to is one of my favourite pieces of music, the tune Finlandia by Sibelius and the words BE Still MY SOUL. Let these images speak to you however the Spirit leads. Be Still and know the Great I AM-ness of God's presence and the sacred gift of community.

#### SHOW PRESENTATION IMAGES SET TO MUSIC



The level of intricate detail in those leaves is beautiful to behold. And what makes this banner even more special ... is its position.



It's front of church at the altar. So every time we come forward to take Holy Communion, we are greeted by a tangible reminder of this communities rich creative diversity. All the leaves on this tree of life - represent all the people that bring this community to life - and as we all come forward to take the sacrament of Holy Communion, we receive the bread of life in Jesus Christ.

“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened”, said Jesus, and I will give you rest and encouragement for you souls. Have you noticed how Jesus was a great encourager? Whatever peoples emotional, physical spiritual needs, whatever their wounds and despair, Jesus never allowed them to feel alone and excluded. And I truly believe that the spirit of encouragement is one of the most under-estimated of all the Spiritual gifts. And the Irish poet/priest John O'Donohue, captures exactly why this is with these words ... [“One of the most beautiful gifts in the world is the gift of encouragement. When someone encourages you, that person helps you over a threshold you might otherwise never have crossed on your own.”](#)

How many times in your life and in these past months have you been helped over a threshold by words of encouragement that you may never have crossed on your own? So often these past weeks, just as I've felt weary or burdened, an email arrives, or a text arrives, or a phone call arrives, a scripture verse arrives...all with a word of encouragement. And it enables me to cross a threshold I was finding a little tough.

**So let's celebrate this gift of encouragement now.** I want to share 2 letters that arrived to me... but they are words of encouragement for all of us, because they are about the gracious spirit of this community.

Firstly, a letter from a member of Vestry. These words are special because Vestry have had 2 huge meetings in 7 days to discuss all the big issues before us that could be potentially very divisive. But the Spirit at the meetings was testimony to the spirit of Christ and grace.

[Hi Josh. I just wanted to touch base and acknowledge the thoughtful and safe place at St Georges within the context of vestry. It is very special to be a part of and I appreciate how all opinions and perspectives are considered in a loving and caring way. It is good to be able to process together and work through issues as they arise - and how this leads to a united approach. I feel grateful every day to be a part of St Georges and one of the key reasons is that I am free to be who I am and accepted. And of course, that is grace.](#)

This next letter is from Garland, and I do have her permission to reveal her name and her age. The reason I do this is because Garland is 87 and her words are an inspiration and encouragement for all of us to never lose the sense of privilege and excitement of what it is to be a worshipping community. Garland said this...

Kia Ora Josh

[What a testing time it is! Since the present lockdown started, I have so missed the Sunday fellowship. I miss the anticipation ... and then the actual getting together with the congregation, the music and worship. The teaching and receiving the Holy Communion and the wondrous feeling of being touched by the Holy Spirit. Like many other older members of the congregation who live on their own, its only natural in Lockdown to feel lonely. But I find myself praying at impromptu times and breaking into singing one of our hymns and worship songs in the shower, or out walking, pottering in the garden, or doing daily chores. I look forward to the time when we can return to normal on Sundays and you will see me scurrying to be seated at St G's in joyful anticipation. With love and blessings Garland.](#)

How encouraging are these words to all of us for when we finally do come back together as a worshipping community? For all of us to be “scurrying to be seated at St G's in joyful anticipation.”

I'll finish with these words and a final mediation.

There is nothing like having something precious taken away from you, to make you realise just HOW deeply significant it is to your life. Being here in Church in a sacred space, surrounded by the significance of the sacramental has reminded me of a deep truth for our times.

We live in a world that feels increasingly disconnected from the spiritual expressions of who we are as people made in the image of God. So taking time to BE still and know the great I AM-ness of God, is crucial for our own humanity and I believe, the wellness of our soul. To become more deeply connected to God and more deeply connected to each other.

So lets have a time of meditation to contemplate and savour all of this. I've asked some of our community to play a verse each of the beautiful song 'Be Still and know that I am God'. And what this video expresses for me, is what Church community is all about. 4 different people, playing 4 different instruments in 4 different styles, BUT they are all playing the one same song of worship. A song about our one desire to know more of God's life-giving unforced rhythms of grace in our lives. The sacred gift of community.